

Film: 'Russia,' a Skilled Documentary

RUSSIA, a color documentary directed, photographed and produced by Theodore Holcomb, with a commentary written by Harrison E. Salisbury. At the Festival Theater, 57th Street at Fifth Avenue. Running time: 109 minutes. (Not submitted at this time to the Motion Picture Association of America's Production Code and Rating Administration for rating as to audience suitability.)

"Half a city lies buried here," says the English-speaking narrator of "Russia," as the camera opens on a bustling criss-cross of pedestrians years after the titanic Battle of Leningrad. About three minutes is all it takes to realize that this is a color documentary feature of the exceptional balance, skill and candor, minus one sprout of traditional travelogue corn.

• This is no superficial scanning of a vast country, crammed with sound-track

statistics and history. Nor does it dutifully trek through fairly familiar landmarks, such as the Kremlin and the Hermitage Museum. Neither does the picture furtively climb over back walls, although some of the comments are far from Utopian.

The film was shot by Theodore Holcomb, the director-photographer-editor-producer, over a six-month period. The result, in beautiful color, is a searching camera record of marvelous informality and immediacy that reaches to the farthest, unfamiliar rustic areas and makes the viewer feel like an intelligent, inquisitive tourist. A splendid commentary, both simple and scholarly, written by Harrison E. Salisbury is an ideal guide, weighing pros

and cons of everyday Soviet life, briskly footnoting history and pinpointing the awesome complexities of the Soviet Union today. Mr. Salisbury was a correspondent there for The New York Times.

One view of a Siberian atom research center draws the observation that "workers here say they have less government interference and suffer less propaganda." Black Sea resort life is contrasted to the simpler life, a few miles away, of ancient Georgian peasants in the Armenian mountains. In urban Georgia, with modern apartments for the bureaucratic elite, indigenous "pride and nationalism" remain irritants to their Soviet rulers.

The film closes with some magnificent panoramas of modern Moscow. The camera visits the city's Bird Market, one of the very few sites of individual business enterprise in the Soviet Union, and the graves of Scriabin, Chekov, the wife of Stalin (adorned with a beautiful white bust) and Boris Pasternak. Watching an impressive cluster of quaint old churches, we learn that about "one-fourth of the population still attend" and that "there is now interest by young people."

There are repeated, tactful passages with no comment, with the camera studying the faces of pedestrians, urban and rustic, going about the business of living the Russian way. Here, "Russia" speaks for itself, memorably.